

Florin Japanese American Citizens League
Oral History Project

Oral History Interview
with
CHIYOE MANJI KOBAYASHI

August 2, 1996
Sacramento, California

By Joy Nozaki Gee

Florin Japanese American Citizens League
and
Oral History Program
California State University, Sacramento
Sacramento, California



JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE

FLORIN CHAPTER • PO Box • SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA 95829-2634

PREFACE

In the summer of 1987, a small group of people from the Florin JACL met at Mary and Al Tsukamoto's home to plan a new project for the organization. Because of the unique history of Florin, we felt that there were special stories that needed to be preserved. The town of Florin, California was once a thriving farming community with a large Japanese American population. The World War II internment of persons of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast, devastated the town and it never recovered. Today there is no town of Florin; it has been merged into the larger county of Sacramento. Many Japanese Americans who reside throughout the United States, however, have their origins from Florin, or have relatives and friends who once had ties to this community. The town may no longer exist, but the spirit of the community continues to survive in people's hearts and memories.

Several hours have been devoted to interviewing former Florin residents. The focus of the interviews was on the forced internment and life in the relocation camps, but our questions touched on other issues. We asked about their immigration to the United States from Japan, pre-war experiences, resettlement after the war and personal philosophies. We also wanted to record the stories of the people left behind. They were friends and neighbors who watched in anguish as the trains transported the community away.

We have conducted these interviews with feelings of urgency. If we are to come away with lessons from this historic tragedy, we must listen to and become acquainted with the people who were there. Many of these historians are in their 70's, 80's and 90's. We are grateful that they were willing to share their experiences and to answer our questions with openness and thoughtfulness.

We owe special thanks to James F. Carlson, former Assistant Dean of American River College and to Jackie Reinier, former Director of the Oral History Program at California State University in Sacramento. Without their enthusiasm, encouragement and expertise, we never could have produced this collection of oral histories. We also wish to acknowledge the project members, volunteers, the Florin JACL which contributed financial support, Sumitomo Bank for their corporate donation, and the Taisho Young Mens Association which contributed some of their assets as they dissolved their corporation on December 31, 1991.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER

Joy Nozaki Gee, received her BS and MS in Business Administration from the University of California, Berkeley. The latter of her 32 years of employment with the state was with the Department of Social Welfare, later known as the Department of Social Services.

She is the co-editor of CRYSTAL CITY INTERNMENT CAMP, 50th Anniversary Reunion held on October 8-10, 1993 in Monterey, California.

INTERVIEW TIME AND PLACE

This interview took place at the home of Chiyoee Manji Kobayashi and her husband, Iwao Kobayashi on August 2, 1996. Two more visits followed for more information and barrowing of family pictures.

TRANSCRIBING. TRANSLATING AND EDITING

Joy Nozaki Gee did it in its entirety. Some portions were deleted at the editor's discretion.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Several pictures from the family album were reproduced. The primary picture was reproduced by Dan Inouye, member of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League.

TAPES AND INTERVIEW RECORDS

Copies of the bound transcript and tape will be kept by the Florin Japanese American Citizens League and the California State University, Sacramento Archives located at 6000 J Street, Sacramento, California 95819.

California State University, Sacramento
Oral History Program
Biographical Summary
Chiyo Manji Kobayashi

The father of Chiyo Manji Kobayashi tasted the *mochi*, rice cake made from a luxury rice variety simply called "sweet rice." He had made it from the sweet rice grown from an envelop of seeds he had sent from Japan as an experiment. "This will do, this will do," he said, and this was the beginning of the farming of sweet rice in northern California.

Chiyo Manji Kobayashi herself did not see the expansion of her father's sweet rice operation. She was sent to Japan in 1936 at age 16 to be educated as often was the custom in the 1930's. Other than a visit in 1953, she did not return to the United States until 1957, 21 years later. With her marriage in Japan to a naval officer of the Japanese Imperial navy, her upper class life in Japan contrasted drastically with life in the U.S. as a kibei with a Japanese husband and three children born in Japan. Another child was born in the U.S. amid severe hardship, but hard work and perseverance over many years won out to bring Chiyo and her family to success and happiness today.

Mrs. Chiyo Kobayashi was born on February 29, 1920 at Marysville, California. Her mother is Chise Uchiyama, born on September 20, 1895 in Yamaguchi, Japan, and she was a housewife. Her father was Yoshigo Manji, born on February 5, 1882 in Yamaguchi, Japan; Mr. Manji was a farmer. Chiyo attended schools in Richville and Marysville, California, and completed her education from age 16 in Japan.

Chiyo was married to Iwao Kobayashi, a naval officer, on April 30, 1940 in Japan. Mr. Kobayashi was born on November 9, 1915 in Yamaguchi, Japan. When he came to the U.S., he worked as a gardener. Chiyo and Iwao have four children: Susue, born November 12, 1941; Kenichiro, born August 11, 1944; Yoshio, born August 1, 1949; and Lysa, born October 17, 1959.

Chiyo and Iwao Kobayashi presently resides at 1011 Johnfer Way, Sacramento, California, 95831. Telephone number is (916) 395-6161.

Florin JACL Oral History Project
CSUS Japanese American Archive Collection
Oral History - Chiyo Manji Kobayashi

GEE: This is an interview with Chiyo Manji Kobayashi, a nisei woman, 76 years old, at 1011 Johnfer Way, Sacramento, CA 95831 on August 2, 1996. The interviewer is Joy Nozaki Gee, of the Florin JACL Oral History Project.

We will start with your parents. Do you remember some of the stories of your parents when they were living in Japan? Before they came to the United States.

KOBAYASHI: Dad was the youngest one of the family, but he took over the family name. He came here at a young age, and he worked at an Oroville mine as a miner. He came here in 1906 and he worked there, and later got into an accident, not a very big one, and got hurt, and the owners wanted him to help around the house. That is where he learned how to cook, and things like that.

GEE: The owners were Caucasian?

KOBAYASHI: Yes, they were the ones that had the contract so they came after him to San Francisco. In a horse and buggy.

GEE: A lot of people were hired at the same time?

KOBAYASHI: I really don't know that.

GEE: He probably was not the only one.

KOBAYASHI: I don't think so.

GEE: But they cared enough to provide a job for him after he was disabled.

KOBAYASHI: He worked at the house, learning how to cook, learning their ways, polishing the floor, cleaning the house and all that. And after he recovered, he kept on doing that and didn't go back to the mines.

GEE: When did he meet your mother?

KOBAYASHI: He went back to Japan in 1915 and built himself a home and he got married, and his wife got pregnant. So he had the baby over there. When the baby was a year old, he came back to the United States and left the baby with his mother. He came first, because in those days, they had to work together, so they left the baby and she came on her own. Dad was in Chico already, but after she came she got pregnant, and had a bad pregnancy, and died. And everything went haywire. In the meantime, he had opened a restaurant for himself. This is my father's first wife. She died in 1916, my mother was his second wife and my mother married him in 1918.

GEE: She was his picture bride?

KOBAYASHI: Well, they were some kind of a shirt-tail relative, I think. But they didn't know each other. But the parents, the family knew each other. And a lot of things happened.

GEE: In Chico, what kind of work did he do?

KOBAYASHI: He was with his first wife, and he brought a restaurant and he thought he was going to make fast money, that is what they had in mind, but she was sick for a long time, and in the meantime, that cleaned him out. When my mother came in 1918, he went first started going into rice farming with someone else, and then he was in farming after that.

GEE: Was that when he went into sweet rice?

KOBAYASHI: No, that came later, in the early thirties. The sweet rice was coming from Japan. He thought everybody may like it so he sent for the seed, and it came in an envelope from Japan. Just a handful, and it took him years to plant 50 acres. The first thing he did was to make sweet rice into mochi and it was good so he said it will do, it will do. That's how he started.

GEE: Did he make a fortune on that?

KOBAYASHI: I don't know because I went to Japan in 1936. He farmed all over the place, Knight's Landing and we had to move from place to place.

GEE: How many of you were there?

KOBAYASHI: There were eight of us. I'm the oldest one.

GEE: So you were the *nechan* (eldest sister) looking after the seven other children.

KOBAYASHI: She had them so close, so naturally, the oldest one had to help take care of them. I was the second mother. I went to Japan in 1936, I was 16 when I went back. I didn't come back until 1957. I was in the second year in high school when I left. When I started school,

my parents said *kawaiso*, (feel sorry for) since I did not speak English at all, so living in the country, my mother thought I should wait a year later when my sister was ready for kindergarten, so I would have the company of my sister. So I am older than my classmates. I had a hard time learning how to speak English. Since I was the oldest one, and there were no big brothers and sisters, and isseis didn't speak English. They didn't have hakujin friends, and being in the country, I spoke only Japanese. So it was hard for me.

GEE: So you had to learn your English in American school. Where did you start school?

KOBAYASHI: It was in Richville, I think. Somewhere in northern California.

GEE: What were some of your childhood memories? Grammar school for instance.

KOBAYASHI: Normal, sometimes the teachers did not like Japanese. Some people lied and said they were Chinese.

GEE: There was less prejudice of the Chinese?

KOBAYASHI: Some teachers liked the Chinese, but for some reason, they did not like the Japanese. So parents said *koraena-sai, shinbo shiniasai*. (persevere). That is the way we were taught. So we were not aggressive. One teacher told me the Japanese are good followers, but they will never be a leader. They are not aggressive enough. The parents held them back.

GEE: It is in the culture. One of the reason is that the Japanese was repressed and held down so much. From the Tokugawa era on, if

they showed initiative and independence, they were slapped down, squashed down.

KOBAYASHI: They had certain class, this class and that class. Even the lowest class, they had their things of this is bad and this is good. Teach them the value of family, they have to be taught when they are small. We were taught, this way or else. No way.

GEE: Do you remember some of the activities you engaged in grammar school, did you play after school?

KOBAYASHI: Volley ball. Not too much. Not like now.

GEE: Did you have a Japanese school in your area?

KOBAYASHI: We went, every single day.

GEE: In Arroyo Grande, life revolved around the Japanese School. So it was like a cocoon of our own world. Fourth of July we had barbecue where the whole community get together. Christmas holiday. Even though it was separate, it was a complete life.

KOBAYASHI: We celebrated holidays, so it wasn't bad. The church was everything. The issei liked it.

GEE: Did the Japanese school have plays?

KOBAYASHI: On New Year's we had *shibai* (play). Sacramento had it too, so we used to borrow those costumes from Sacramento and the issei loved it because it was the only entertainment they had, and those silent movies. They used to come around, and the movies were so sad, so if it was not a crying movie, it was not a good movie.

GEE: Were there any special events in American school?

KOBAYASHI: Not much, we went to Japanese school. We just learned.

GEE: What about high school?

KOBAYASHI: I went to Maryville high school, that was different from grammar school. I went to the Marysville elementary school.

GEE: How did it differ?

KOBAYASHI: Oh, they had different classrooms for different subjects, not like grammar school where we had just one. So we were busy.

GEE: What were some of things you were busy at?

KOBAYASHI: Busy learning.

GEE: Were all the Japanese good in their studies?

KOBAYASHI: I wasn't; the rest of them got good grades, but not me. I was not a scholar. I did not study. Even in Japan, my attitude was that I was going back to the United States, so I didn't feel the need to study. Now I regret it.

GEE: In high school, were you in any of the extracurricular activities, that you remember, Spanish club, sports, music?

KOBAYASHI: I wasn't in any of those. I don't think the Japanese were active in any of those things, but I don't remember. Well the Japanese were in honor societies, and did very well.

GEE: Was there anything funny in high school?

KOBAYASHI: Well Freshman when they initiate you; wear something green, short, I didn't like that, but I don't remember.

GEE: Then you were 16, and you were sent to Japan.

KOBAYASHI: In those days, they used to send their kids to Japan. They thought you would be better off. They wanted you to learn Japanese.

GEE: What about Japanese school?

KOBAYASHI: You learned to read and write. That is why when I went back to school in Japan, I went into the second year of high school and got in. They accepted me and I did my best, so I graduated with them.

GEE: So it was a direct transfer.

KOBAYASHI: Yes, but it was hard. I could read and write, but when I went back to Japan, I didn't know any Japanese history at all.

GEE: Did your parents subscribe to any Japanese magazine, like *shufuno-tomo* and *yonen-club*?

KOBAYASHI: No, I don't know, my father had *Fuji* and *Kingu*. We didn't read that, I really don't remember. But I was able to read and write so that helped a lot.

GEE: So you went two or three years to *Joggakko* (women's higher school)

KOBAYASHI: Three years.

GEE: After you graduated, what did you do?

KOBAYASHI: One year I went to Japanese sewing, *ohana* (floral arrangement) and *ocha* (tea ceremony.)

GEE: To get ready to get married?

KOBAYASHI: Exactly, I was going to come back, because my parents wanted me to come back to the U.S., but in the meantime the person I was going to come back with in June got sick, and I was delayed, so I won't be able to go back until September. But in the meantime my relative said there are a lot of of you over there, so why don't you stay.

GEE: How many of you were there?

KOBAYASHI: I was the only one. And the relatives said why don't you get married here, and there was a shirt tail relative, he's a good guy.

GEE: So you married Mr. Kobayashi? He's your first and only husband?

KOBAYASHI: I think that is what you call *en ga aru* (fate). I think my parents were kind of disappointed, my grandfather on my mother's side said "It's okay for just one of you to stay here."

GEE: It is your life.

KOBAYASHI: I know, but I kind of leaned on that, nice, you know. At 18 or 19, you don't know what you like. But I like Japan anyway.

GEE: You were in Yamaguchi-ken. But Japan is a poor country.

KOBAYASHI: It was a poor country, but it wasn't that great here either. In the country we had no electricity, no running water, no hot water, and an outhouse. Japan was fine, nice and clean, nothing wrong with that. When you were in the country, first thing they make is *nihon-buro* (Japanese bath tub), you had a hot tub. In Japan, it was nice and clean. It wasn't so bad for me. Not much of a transition.

GEE: So there was a contrast in the level of living. So compared to the rural setting you were in, Japanese life was good.

KOBAYASHI: In those days, it was really nice. Not much problem there.

GEE: And you don't have to face the prejudice. So you got married at 20, and returned at age 37, 21 years later.

KOBAYASHI: I came back in 1957.

GEE: Then all of your children were born in Japan.

KOBAYASHI: Except my youngest one, she was born in Yuba City. My other three were 16, 13 and 8 when we returned.

GEE: What did Mr. Kobayashi do in Japan?

KOBAYASHI: He was a career naval officer in the Imperial Japanese Navy.

GEE: Then you had a very good life as a naval officer's wife.

KOBAYASHI: Yes, it was alright until the war ended. During the war, it wasn't bad, we didn't have any trouble with food or anything like that. We didn't have ration because we owned land. My father and mother-in-law owned land, so everything came in. They didn't farm, but they had sharecroppers, and instead of money, they brought rice and whatever they raised. But after the war, the land was taken away from us. If you didn't farm the land yourself, and you were renting to tenants, they had a right to that land, and you had to sell to the tenants, cheap. Tenants had it good, they became rich, and we lost everything.

GEE: So you were forced into poverty because MacArthur's land reform stripped you of your land. So the war ended, and your husband was no longer a naval officer...

KOBAYASHI: He came back without anything, the whole navy just collapsed. He was at Turk Island, somewhere in the South Pacific. We didn't know whether he was dead or alive until he got home about six months later and he said "here I am" and I said "I thought you were long since dead."

GEE: There was no communication? There was no mail system?

KOBAYASHI: There was mail service, but they wouldn't let the families know where they were, so we didn't know where he was. When he came home, that is when he told me where he was. After he came home, he worked for the Hitachi Company where my father-in-law worked. But that wasn't enough with just one person working. He worked as an engineer. He could support a family, but I thought of my children because there wasn't enough to educate them. Then the Armed Forces came in, so I worked for them for five years. I worked as a secretary for the commanding officer. I typed, but

learned typing on the job. They wanted someone who was bilingual, so most of the time I was an interpreter. It was okay. Then after five years, I quit, and with my mother's help, I was able to come here. Because I had my citizenship. That's why my husband and children were able to come easily.

GEE: Did you have difficulty because your husband was in the navy?

KOBAYASHI: They really screened him, what kind of book he read, what he had in possession, but he was clean. I think they were afraid of Communists coming in, because they really put him through the wringer.

GEE: In Japan, they think the Navy was thought be better than the Army. The Navy men were the elite of the military?

KOBAYASHI: They had to be, because they had to go out. And even the wives, they screened them too.

GEE: How long did it take for you to come back?

KOBAYASHI: Right away, the paperwork was easy. I had the citizenship too. And everything went fine.

GEE: You went back to Marysville?

KOBAYASHI: Yes.

GEE: Then what did you decide to do, and your husband decide what to do when he came back here?

KOBAYASHI: My brother had contracted a peach orchard, so he worked there. Then my brother decided to quit, and he went back to school. So my husband became a gardener.

GEE: So he worked in the peach orchard?

KOBAYASHI: Yes, he worked under my brother. Farming, but he worked as a laborer.

GEE: It was hard on him wasn't it?

KOBAYASHI: But he didn't mind at all, for the children's sake he said, they might have a better life here.

GEE: You raised the children and he worked?

KOBAYASHI: I worked too, sometimes on the farm, sorting peaches, like that. After he quit gardening, we moved to town and I went to work as a housekeeper for a firm from 1966 until 1988. He has been retired since 1979, for 17 years.

GEE: Now in World War II...

KOBAYASHI: In World War II we were in Japan. It was 1957 when we returned to the U.S. My mother and dad, they were in Tule Lake during the war. I missed all that camp life. There were all kinds of rumors in Japan of the fate of the people in camp. They were really worried. I heard how they were all treated in Tule Lake, I heard all this from my mother.

GEE: What was your life beginning 1957?

KOBAYASHI: Well we just had to go to work.

GEE: Any particular thing that stands out in your memory?

KOBAYASHI: We both had to work hard to get where we are right now, that's all.

GEE: What were some your special joys as you were raising your children?

KOBAYASHI: When my son came back from Vietnam alive. I was worried about him. In 1967 and 1968, he was in the middle of it.

GEE: How many grandchildren do you have?

KOBAYASHI: I have seven, they are all grown. The youngest one is 16, and he is in Argentina now for the summer, like an exchange student. He is coming back on the 17th of August.

GEE: The war was pretty bad, but because you had land you rented to tenant, you didn't have to go through the hardship that the average Japanese went through during the war. What was it like after the war?

KOBAYASHI: After the war, everything was rationed and you couldn't do anything, there were no salt, no sugar, no shoyu, all rationed. Everything was rationed.

GEE: Transportation was bad wasn't it?

KOBAYASHI: Yes, if you had a bicycle, there were no tires. It was really hard.

GEE: How long did that period last?

KOBAYASHI: It was bad for ten years. Maybe less than ten years. We had kind of given up. After 12 years we decided to come here. We thought we would not be able to educate our kids. That was the most important thing in my life. That is why we came back. Two years after we came back, we had another one, and it was at a bad time when we didn't have anything, but she survived. So for what we have, we had to work for it and it wasn't easy.

GEE: When did you come to Sacramento?

KOBAYASHI: In 1989.

GEE: What prompted you to come to Sacramento?

KOBAYASHI: Because of our four children, three of them are here. There is no industry in Yuba City, so unless you are a farmer, when you finish school or college, you have to go elsewhere to get a job.

GEE: Your husband never became a farmer?

KOBAYASHI: No. But my youngest one is a farmer in Yuba City, for about 20 years already, leasing 150 acres on his own. He raises about 900 acres of tomatoes altogether. Tri-Valley or Hunt have a contract with you, and you raise the acreage, and they will buy the tomatoes you raise for the cannery.

GEE: Were you already retired when you moved to Sacramento?

KOBAYASHI: My husband was retired, long before we moved to Sacramento. I worked until 1988, and when I moved here, I quit.

GEE: What do you do now?

KOBAYASHI: I do a lot of things for my kids. Three of my kids are within 2 1/2 miles of here. I am busier than ever, because there is so much to do. I take turn with my sisters in taking care of my Mother, who will be 101 in September 1996. She lives in Marysville, and I go once a month, from Sunday to Sunday. My father passed away at 87. I am also in Fujinkai (Ladies' Association), and take koto lessons.

GEE: And what does your husband do?

KOBAYASHI: He does calligraphy, and he likes to play go (Japanese chess game), but there is no one to play with. He is 80 years old, going on 81.

GEE: Thank you for giving me your time. When the draft is ready, I will be checking back with you so that you can make corrections and make additions and omissions. We will then put it in final form, and bring it back for your approval, and it will be bound into a book and become part of the Florin JACL Oral History Project. A copy of the tape will be made for you, and you will receive one copy of the bound interview. Thank you again.